

Yoga AND Self Care

IT SEEMS LIKE OUR WORLD IS BECOMING MORE **COMPLICATED** AND MORE **STRESSFUL** EACH DAY. LEARNING HOW TO TAKE CARE OF YOURSELF IS ESSENTIAL, SAYS **GARTH HEWITT**.

One of the things I love about yoga, and that I love to teach to my students is that it's not about anyone else giving you an experience, or you needing anyone else in order to take care of yourself and find balance. Yoga teaches us how to recognize when we are out of balance and gives us the tools to bring ourselves back into balance. This is the essence of Yoga.

There's an old Buddhist saying, "The greatest gift you can give to the world is that of your own Self transformation."

My teacher Dharma Mittra always says, "Take responsibility for your own practice."

A good teacher can show you the open door and even lead you to the doorstep but it's up to you to walk through that doorway.

Use your Yoga practice to heal yourself, find balance, and cultivate more peace in your life, and then go out into the world and be a positive influence on everyone you meet. This is the power of yoga. Yoga can help us lift ourselves up, out of the



mud, and move towards the light. We can then help others lift themselves up too.

My recommendation for students who are feeling out of balance is to first make sure you are getting on your mat and practicing regularly. And if you aren't practicing Yoga yet, then just start taking a Yoga class and try to make Yoga a bigger part of your life.

The best advice I got early on in my practice was to be consistent, be patient, and be persistent. You have to show up regularly for yourself in order to undo old patterns and let go of old habits that aren't serving you. Yoga needs to be like brushing your teeth. Do it regularly for the best results. Let it be a part of your daily routine. Don't brush your teeth for several hours, a few days in a row, until your gums are bleeding, and then stop brushing for a week. This is not helpful. Be consistent, be patient, and be persistent.

Master Teacher Sri T. Krishnamacharya – the teacher of several of my teacher's has a famous quote, "Yoga is simply replacing old patterns that aren't serving you with new patterns that will lead you in a more positive direction."

Let's look at why Yoga is so great at helping you find balance and some of the specific practices that you might want to do if you know you are out of balance and in which direction.

Modern Yoga classes are filled with Hatha Yoga practices. Hatha Yoga is all about finding balance. One of the main benefits of the Hatha Yoga practices is that they give us the ability to self-regulate the autonomic nervous system.

The autonomic nervous system is constantly shifting between the sympathetic, right nostril, masculine response and the parasympathetic, left nostril, feminine response. Each side of the autonomic nervous system is in charge for about 60-90 minutes and then it switches. This is why sometimes during the day you might notice that one of your nostrils is more open and more active than the other.

The sympathetic response increases our ability to concentrate, causes our blood vessels to the limbs to dilate, our senses to become sharper, our heart rate to elevate, and our breath to speed up. All this is helping us in case we need to freeze, fight, or run away and is commonly called the "fight, flight or freeze" response. The parasympathetic response helps us to calm down and relax, causes our blood vessels to the organs to dilate, our heart rate to decrease, and our breath to slow down. All this is helping us to relax, rest, digest our food, and heal the body more efficiently and is commonly called the "rest and digest" response.

In a perfect world our autonomic nervous system would shift back and forth regularly. Sometimes we would feel energized and sometimes we would feel relaxed but overall, we'd feel pretty balanced. This doesn't always happen and for many of us one side is dominating most of the time and because of all of the outside stimulation in our modern world the sympathetic side is often the one that is dominating and leading to a number of problems that could be easily prevented with a little self-care.

Sun Salutations, the Head Balance and Shoulder Stand Sequence, Back bending and Forward Folding, and the different Hatha Yoga Pranayama practices are some of the best tools we have in Yoga to help us regulate and balance the autonomic nervous system when it becomes out of balance.

Sun Salutations go back and forth between back bending and forward folding. Backbends are stimulating and energizing. Forward folding poses are calming and relaxing. The Head Balance is stimulating and helps us to focus and the Shoulder Stand is calming and helps us to relax. There are different pranayama techniques which are either energizing or calming. Techniques like Breath of Fire and Light Headed Breathing are heating and energizing, while techniques like the Cooling Breath and the Crow's Beak Breath are cooling and calming. The alternate nostril breathing techniques stimulate either the sympathetic, right nostril side of the nervous system, the parasympathetic, left nostril side of the nervous system, or both.

In addition to the Sun Salutations, Head Balance and Shoulder Stand, Backbending and Forward Folding poses, and the





THE SUPPORTED BRIDGE WITH LEGS UP AND SUPPORTED BRIDGE WITH LEGS UP THE WALL ARE TWO VARIATIONS OF SHOULDER STAND THAT ARE ALSO CALLED VIPARITA KARANI MUDRA. VIPARITA KARANI MEANS REVERSING THE FLOW. THESE TWO POSES, LIKE THE SHOULDER STAND, HELP TO STIMULATE THE PARASYMPATHETIC RESPONSE -- AND IN TODAY'S MODERN WORLD WHERE THERE IS SO MUCH STIMULATION THESE TWO RESTORATIVE VARIATIONS OF THE SHOULDER STAND CAN BE PRACTICED TO RELAX, LET GO, AND TURN INWARD. THESE POSES ARE ALSO GREAT FOR THE CARDIOVASCULAR SYSTEM, GOOD FOR THE SPINE, AND HELP THE HIPS TO RELEASE. IF YOU NEED TO SLOW DOWN AND RELAX, TRY ONE OF THESE POSES FOR 10-15 MINUTES FOR THE MOST BENEFIT. CLOSE YOUR EYES. SLOW YOUR BREATH DOWN. AND TRY TO CONCENTRATE AT THE MIDDLE OF YOUR EYEBROWS.



THE SUPPORTED LYING DOWN BOUND ANGLE ASANA IS AN EXCELLENT RESTORATIVE POSE THAT HELPS TO GENTLY RELEASE AND OPEN THE HIPS. IN ADDITION TO SLOWLY RELEASING THE HIPS, THE LYING DOWN POSITION WILL ALSO HELP STIMULATE THE PARASYMPATHETIC RESPONSE. STUDENTS WILL GAIN THE MOST BENEFIT FROM THIS POSE WITH A LONG HOLD OF 10-15 MINUTES AS WELL. CLOSE YOUR EYES. SLOW YOUR BREATH. AND TRY TO CONCENTRATE AT THE MIDDLE OF YOUR EYEBROWS.

Pranayama practices, I would recommend for students who need to slow down, relax and let go -- three restorative poses that will help stimulate the parasympathetic response while gently releasing and opening up the hips and spine, as well as the practice of Yoga Nidra guided meditation, which is one of the most healing practices in Yoga and helps students learn to let go of the outer world, turn inward and experience a deep state of relaxation.

I practice Yoga Nidra every day. I recommend this practice to all my students. Yoga Nidra is a key component of the signature Shiva Meditation® class that I teach regularly.

Yoga Nidra encourages students to withdraw the senses, turn inward, and let go of the outer world, leaving even the body behind. Yoga Nidra means Yogic sleep. The purpose of the practice is not to fall asleep but it's okay if you do fall asleep during the practice. You still receive the benefits. Yoga Nidra

teaches students to stay awake and aware as the body falls asleep. Yoga Nidra is usually done lying down in Shavasana – the Final Resting Pose, and most students will want to put a bolster under their knees and a blanket under their head for additional support. An eye pillow or towel over the eyes can help release tension and encourage relaxation, and a blanket can help if you find you get cold during the practice. A full Yoga Nidra session is usually 50 minutes to an hour long. Try to do your practice at the same time each day. There are many great Yoga Nidra teachers who have recorded their classes and these can be downloaded online. I am currently studying with Dr. Richard Miller and I recommend his i-Rest program.

Julie Rader and Rod Stryker also have popular recordings available. In addition to studying with Richard Miller, I first studied the Satyananda Yoga Nidra tradition and also learned to teach Yoga Nidra from my teacher Sri Dharma Mittra.



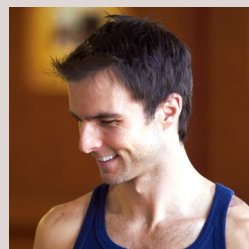
THE SUPPORTED LYING DOWN KNEELING WARRIOR IS ANOTHER EXCELLENT RESTORATIVE POSE THAT HELPS TO GENTLY RELEASE THE HIP FLEXORS, BRINGING THE HIPS INTO EXTENSION WITH THE KNEES IN DEEP FLEXION. MOST PEOPLE HAVE CHRONICALLY TIGHT HIP FLEXORS. THIS IS BECAUSE THE HIPS ARE CONSTANTLY IN FLEXION WHILE WE ARE SITTING, DRIVING, USING THE TOILET...ETC. WHEN THE HIP FLEXOR MUSCLES ARE TIGHT IT CAN LEAD TO A LOT OF COMPRESSION IN THE LOW BACK WHICH OFTEN CAUSES LOW BACK PAIN. THIS POSE WILL HELP TO RELEASE SOME OF THIS COMPRESSION. STUDENTS WILL GAIN THE MOST BENEFIT FROM THIS POSE WITH A LONG HOLD OF 10-15 MINUTES AS WELL. CLOSE YOUR EYES. SLOW YOUR BREATH. AND TRY TO CONCENTRATE AT THE MIDDLE OF YOUR EYEBROWS.



Yoga Nidra guided meditation is one of the most healing practices we have in Yoga. Swami Satyananda from the Bihar school – the author of the book ‘Yoga Nidra’ says, “One hour of Yoga Nidra is equivalent to four hours of deep restful sleep.”

Most students will benefit the most from the poses above and from a daily Yoga Nidra guided meditation practice, stimulating the parasympathetic side of the autonomic nervous system. The exception are those students whose parasympathetic response is dominant too much of the time and who may be experiencing things like depression, low blood pressure, slow digestion, hypo-thyroidism, auto-immune disorders, lack of energy and/or fatigue. These students may need to stimulate the sympathetic side of their autonomic nervous system and the above practices would not be recommended. Head balance, Backbending poses, more vigorous asana practices, as well as the stimulating pranayama practices -- Breath of Fire and Light Headed Breathing would be more beneficial.

I hope this information gives you more tools so you can find more balance in your life when you are out of balance. Take care of yourself. Enjoy the journey. Every step no matter how small is significant and can lead you in a new direction. Try one of these practices today.



GARTH HEWITT

Garth is a well-known 500 E-RYT teacher and teacher trainer who trained with Sri Dharma Mittra, Srivatsa Ramaswami, Annie Carpenter & the Patthabi Jois family. He currently leads classes, workshops, retreats, and teacher trainings all over the world. www.garthewittyoga.com Facebook.com/garthewittyoga Instagram: @yogigarth Twitter: @yogigarth YouTube: garthewittyoga WeChat: garthewittyoga